

SEAS OF GRASS.

BY ETHEL C. GALE.

OUR Western prairies, stretching as far as eye can reach, and covered with tall grass moving with a wavelike motion in the wind, have often been compared to seas. But our prairies do not deserve the name of seas of grass as well as do the great llanos, or grass plains, of South America.

The llanos of Venezuela occupy an area which Humboldt estimated at 153,000 square miles—a space equal to that occupied by the States of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania. These immense plains are as flat as the surface of the sea in a calm, and the whole weary level is covered with tall, rank grass.

We are told that one might travel over this dead plain for over eleven hundred miles, from the delta of the Orinoco River to the foot of the Andes of Pasto, and not encounter an eminence one foot in height. Yet there really is one slight inequality. This is called a *mesa*, and is a gentle knoll swelling very gradually to an elevation of a few yards. This slight elevation, rising so gradually that the eye does not perceive it, is the watershed which divides the water that falls during the rainy season, sending a part to the south-east to feed the Orinoco, and a part to the north-west to feed the streams flowing to the north.

During the rainy season, from April to the end of October, the great seas of grass become seas of shallow water. The tropical rains pour down in torrents, and the swollen rivers overflow their low

banks, sending their floods over hundreds of square miles of the vast plain. Great numbers of horses and cattle, which have not been able to escape to the slight elevation of the *mesa*, or water-shed, are drowned. When the waters subside, leaving behind a rich, fertilizing sediment, the great plains become beautiful with the tall, flowering grasses of the South American plains, while in the neighborhood of the rivers a few fan-palm trees wave their broad leaves, and delicate mimosas, or sensitive-plants, skirt the river shores.

This is the period during which the llanos deserve their name of seas of grass. Later in the season, when the thirsty earth and heated air have succeeded in drinking up the last remains of the overflow of water, the llanos might be called seas of dust, for the grass has been burnt to powder by the intense dry heat, and the air is filled with dust raised, says Mangim, in his "Desert World," by currents caused by local differences of temperature, even when there is no wind. The dust thus moved in stifling waves is sometimes still farther agitated by opposing winds. When these meet, the dust and sand are caught up into enormous pillars with broad tops spreading out like inverted pyramids, which whirl through the hot air like the sand-spouts of the Saharan Desert, or the water-spouts of the ocean.

The poor animals, which during the rainy season were in such peril of drowning, are now, after a short period of happiness, exposed to equal danger

and worse pain, from the dry waves of dust and an agonizing thirst. How eagerly, then, they listen for the first sounds of the distant thunder, heralding the welcome, life-restoring rain ' It comes ; and for awhile, before the floods reach their height, the vast plains, covered with verdure and furnishing food to thousands of happy animals, become again the gently waving seas of grass.

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